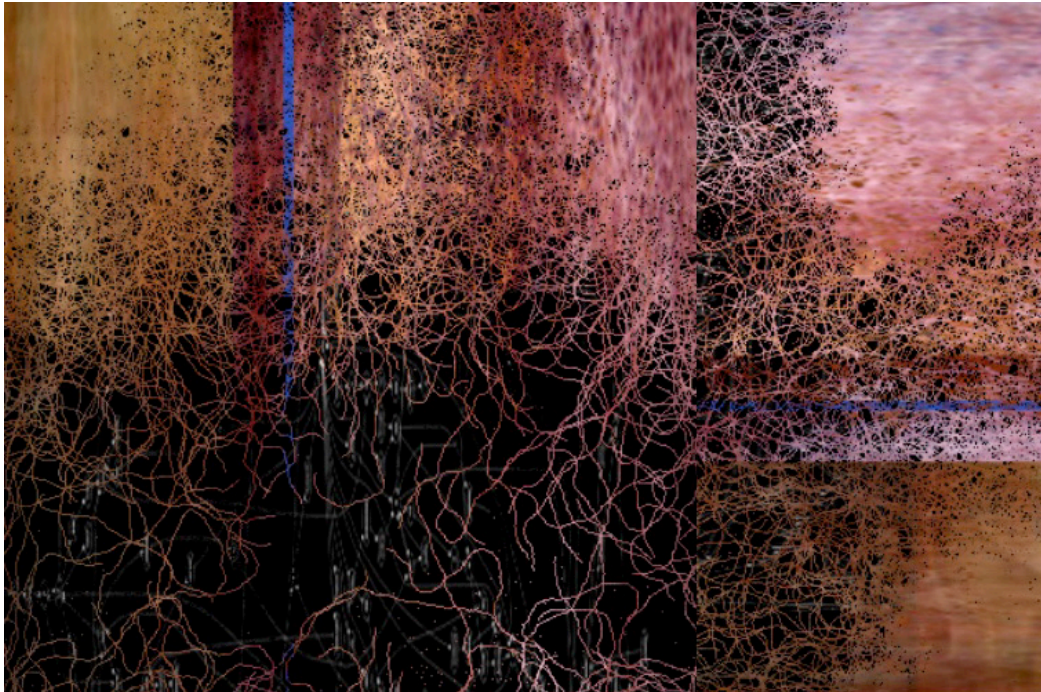


Origins of Virtualism

2003 interview with Frank Popper conducted by Joseph Nechvatal

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Joseph Nechvatal, *intricate scene* (2009) 66 x 44"

Joseph Nechvatal: Frank, you are, without doubt, a scarcity. Anyone who looks at the historical record of the juncture of art and technology finds you nearly unaccompanied when it comes to documenting this historical record between the years of the late-1960's up to the early 1990s. Basically there is you, Jack Burnham's book *Beyond Modern Sculpture* (1968), and Gene Youngblood's reference work *Expanded Cinema* (1970). Specifically, your books *Origins and Development of Kinetic Art* (1968), *Art, Action and Participation* (1975) and *Art of the Electronic Age* (1993) are indispensable research tools in helping us figure out how art got to where it is today - in your terms virtualized. This astonishes me in that technological-informational change is consistently cited as the splintering element which instigated mainstream modernism mutating into what has been called, for lack of a better term, postmodernism. Can you tell me why you first committed your attention as an art historian to this subject of art and technology when most historical and curatorial minds were focused elsewhere?

JN: What were your interests prior to the Sorbonne that led you there? How did world events impact on your choices, for example?

FP: I don't think I can even succinctly enumerate all the personal and historic events that preceded my coming to Paris. As you know, I have tried to cover some of them in my *Reflections* book. What I can try is to single out one or two events and options that have perhaps a bearing on the subjects treated in my present book.

On the personal front, I could mention my unusual initiation into research at a very early age at an experimental primary school in Vienna. My training and experience as a textile engineer there and in the Sudetenland may have had some influence on my later itinerary. But it was mainly my thirst for wide-open spaces - England and its dominions – which, at the time, had privileged places for the research profession that attracted me. That thirst could have had an impact on my inquiry.

Also, before joining the Royal Air Force as a wireless operator and technical interpreter, I joined a refugee Czech forestry workers camp in Somerset, England, where I met writers, artists and other intellectuals while at the same time teaching English literature there.

Then came a long professional stay in Rome where I frequented the Sapienza University. I was particularly concerned with Etruscology and Italian classical, contemporary and even popular poetry. But then I came to stay in Paris - not only because I was interested in many aspects of French civilization, but simply because my wife, Hella Guth (1908-1992), a surrealist-abstract painter, needed this kind of Parisian environment. So I found myself a much-needed artistic and intellectual stimulant.

There is no doubt that behind all these moves there was also a hidden motor made up of world events: the aftermath of the First World War, the advent of the Nazis in Germany, Austria and the Sudetenland, the Second World War and its consequences. But I have the impression that my basic attitude was influenced by the positive side of emigration and exile: a kind of creative nomadism that could be put into relationship with the present day political and cultural situation in which geographical frontiers and intellectual privileges and distinctions are being abolished - thus clearing the way to such all-embracing creations as can be found in virtual art.

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JN: The electronic music scene, in retrospect, was small but extremely strong in Paris beginning in the early 1950s when Pierre Schaeffer initiated the famous Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM) studio. Indeed, the musique concrète experiments of Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry from that time, and Edgard Varèse's purely electronic composition *Poem Electronique* from 1958, to me, still sounds extremely fresh to the ear. Indeed, I must say that it goes perfectly with many types of visual virtual art.

theme of virtuality in art as I understand it, i.e. the humanizing of technology through interactivity and neocommunicability as well as sensory immersion and multisensoriality.

JN: What do you mean by neocommunicability?

research laboratory in which organizers, technicians and artists meet regularly and frequently. In the case of *Electra*, the exhibition team and I managed to integrate the different modes of competence into a coherent visual and intellectual make-up.

Personally, I had an additional advantage in that I held a weekly university seminar for one year preceding the exhibition and during its run at the auditorium of the museum. In that seminar I developed the different themes with the members of the two teams, but also with some invited specialists who intervened particularly during the sessions that took place during the exhibition.

Although I devoted a certain amount of my time and energy to practical matters, I managed to concentrate myself on acquiring a deeper knowledge of the many artistic, technological and scientific parameters involved. This allowed me first to write an Introduction to the catalogue, and later to incorporate some of these findings into my writings.

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JN: I suppose that science-fiction, more so than hard science, has been the leading inspirational force for many virtualizing artists I know. Certainly in my own case that is true.

Unquestionably sci-fi engages the imagination in a gripping way at times. Very much so in that sci-fi has a concrete influence on what gets built from time to time – like cyberspace. Has science fiction had a bearing on your passion for technology and embryonic virtualism?

FP: Unfortunately, my real interest for science-fiction is very recent. This is perhaps surprising because of my frequent mixing with prominent kinetic artists who were influenced by science-fiction - or at least by popular science. They should have incited me already at the time to be more concerned with this subject.

I should like to mention, once again in this context, Nicholas Schöffner. He never failed to relate to me his latest readings or his cinematographic experiences in or close to science-fiction. However, our conversations never made a clear distinction between imaginative science and science-fiction. At a moment when he cooperated with other avant-garde creators - like the composers Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henry, Henry Pousseur, choreographers like Maurice Béjart and scenographers like Jacques Polieri - he took interest in the writings of Jacques Ménétrier, the author of *La médecine fonctionnelle* and *De la mesure de soi, un examen de conscience* and in Stéphane Lupasco, author of *L'énergie et la matière psychique*. In addition, he was reading Werner Heisenberg and Herbert Marcuse. So it was this kind of imaginative scientific, literary, pluriartistic and philosophical mixture in our conversations that could have had an influence on my passion for technology and embryonic virtualism.

I must also say that I had an early preference for popular travel and astronomic fiction like Jules Verne's or James Jeans's. This cannot be compared to the virtual artists' interest in science-fiction literature and films - or a book like *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, however.

humanizing technology by taking into consideration the need for human survival: a survival concerned with biology and freedom. Humans are beings who try to preserve in all circumstances their elementary needs for a certain amount of personal integrity and liberty.

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By this idea of a connected global Left, Ms. Buck-Morss stresses the connectivist aspect of globalization as a communitive humanizing force when theorizing a post-9-11 politics as Hegelian negative dialectics. What role did politics and philosophy play in the construction of your commitment to – and one might say obvious delight with - art-technology?

It would be easy for me to quote a myriad of names that could have had an influence on my present commitment, but that would resemble name-dropping without really showing any essential traits. So I will limit myself to indicating some ideas and their authors that come to mind immediately. There is no doubt that Maurice Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception, Gaston Bachelard's epistemology, and Etienne Souriau's correspondence of the arts (with his analysis of the work of art and his comparing aesthetic method) have had to do with my comprehension of cognitive, multisensorial and interactive elements in technological and virtual art. Also Walter Benjamin's theory of the aura in lieu of reproducibility and Gilles Deleuze's aesthetics of the cinema and his criticism of psychoanalytic concepts played an important role. However, as regards interactivity, I cannot exclude the influence of some psychoanalytical thought on my thinking, particularly that of Sigmund Freud, whose theories cannot be fully appreciated unless they are put into the perspective of a combination of imaginative science, neurophysiology and psychological insight. Of course I was aware of Alfred Adler's individual psychology, Carl Gustav Jung's archetype theories and Jacques Lacan's interpretation and development of Freudian concepts along with Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of the Other. They all played a formative role in my thinking.

establishes the closest relationship possible with the artist. I have applied this method of affinity as I wrote art books, taught art in an experimental university, and organized exhibitions that had an impact on the public awareness of avant-garde artistic issues. This explains also my positive attitude as an alternative art historian who takes a completely different stance than does Paul Virilio. Monsieur Virilio's attitude is based on the assumption that accidents and other catastrophic events are inevitable and which can only be recorded by the artists who are unable to propose other possibilities or virtualities. According to him, the work of these artists cannot have any impact politically or intellectually on the course of events, which is of course not at all my opinion.

Perhaps I should add that already in the 1960s - when I wrote my book on Kinetic Art which formed part of my doctoral dissertation - I had to discover the existence of several hundred artists in many different countries who largely ignored each other's work, but who all pursued aesthetic goals with the aid of real or virtual movement and natural or artificial light. One can of course argue that there was something arbitrary in my assumption that these artists had sufficient matters in common to be classed together under the term of Kinetic (or Luminokinetic) Art. But my way of proceeding was based on some ideas that were in the air at the time, which justified, in my mind, this kind of procedure. Of course, many of the artists, if not all, were not quite satisfied with this classification, but alternatively made use of the term. Some did categorically reject being called kinetic artists. However, even though any kind of classification can irritate artists (or others) I think nevertheless that it is necessary to proceed in this way if one wants to situate the work of an artist with regard to timely ideas - thus showing, among other things, the work's involvement with these timely issues and the way this work engages or transcends them.

After my prise de conscience regarding motion and light, I have tried similar operations based on the assumption that there was a significant relationship to be analyzed between two aesthetic ideas current at the time: artistic endeavors to create works on an environmental scale and spectator participation. This gave rise to my book *Art, Action and Participation*, which you previously mentioned, for which I was again in touch with a considerable number of creators - this time also belonging to other disciplines than the visual arts. I must say that a similar procedure led me to write *Art of the Electronic Age*. For this book likewise I contacted directly artists engaged in the problem of art and technology. This type of procedure is also the basis of my present research into virtuality; research founded on the hypothesis that a new departure in Technological Art has recently been made which can be termed Virtual Art. For this exploration I have established relations and opened discussions with artists whose inquiry takes place within the categories of digital-based projects and environments, multimedia off-line compositions, and on-line works in which interactivity and multisensoriality play a more radical role than before. Here again I fear that some artists will object to be called virtual artists (or artists practicing virtuality), but I still feel that a non-arbitrary classification is necessary and can be regarded as a first step towards a combined mastering of the aesthetic problems of virtual creation.

